

Documents on Diplomacy: The Source

"Few Advantages of an Intimate Connection" William Stephens Smith to John Jay, London, December 6, 1785

Sir — From the political systems which govern the Courts of Europe, permit me to say that in my opinion very few, if any advantages can arise to our Country from an intimate Connection with them. An Avenue for mutual intercourse may be opened but I hope we may not rely upon it, *too much* for a support.

Nature has been vastly bountiful to our Country—it is competent to furnish the necessities—and what we get from abroad are the Luxuries of Life, which seldom fail of bringing with them the vices of their respective Countries, or nourish those already too predominant in our's—the minutest particles of which ought to be guarded against, as repugnant to the principles of our Government. Upon another principle, they themselves present a barrier. Their arrangements are perfectly selfish, and will never extend beyond their own partial benefits. The happiness of mankind is what they treat with derision, when in the least incompatible with their ambition or aggrandizement.

With respect to Europe the present convulsed State of their politics must I think so perfectly command the attention of the respective Courts, that a system may be formed, & measures taken by us to give it an existence, when time and Circumstances admit, before they know a sufficiency of it to counteract our Plan. At the same time it behoves us, & it will require some address to guard against this possibility of being (as a Government) drawn in as a party, when the appeal shall be made to the *Ultima ratio regum* [*final power or war*].

Holland is wrecked with internal Commotion, and divided amongst themselves & every day threatens severe convulsions. Great Britain is distracted with party and almost incapable of pursuing any regular system. The sly Policy of the Court of Versailles is busy with both the active Ambition of the present Emperor of Germany, jealous of the Prussian Power & anxious to recover what the enterprising Genius of Frederick has deprived him of furnishes a strong Line in the picture I am holding up. At the same time that

he finds himself under the necessity of keeping a watchful Eye over the Hungarians who complain of an infringement of their rights. (One of their noblemen in conversation with me one day at Vienna & speaking of America, asked several questions about M^r Paine, whose Pamphlets he was possessed of.) He wrought himself up to a very considerable pitch & at last exclaimed "I wish to God Sir, Common Sense was not confined to your Country—a little of it here would make a great alteration in our affairs. On the other side, the league formed by Prussia with the Electors of Hanover-Saxony, etc, and the demands that King is now making on the States General in behalf of the Prince of Orange furnishes another line, which connected with the approaching periods—which according to the course of Nature must terminate the reigns of the Spanish and Prussian Kings—point to convulsions & wars, which I think it almost impossible to avoid.

To be ready to take advantage of the confusion of those we may properly call our political Enemies, would at least border on prudence & merit applause as the happiness of mankind is our Object, and which, in my opinion, can only be promoted by opening the doors of Liberty as a great cornerstone to this Work.

Permit me to suggest a strict attention to the settlement of the lands on the Ohio & Mississippi, & leave that point, detached, and to its own operation. I am not the least acquainted with M^r Carmichael our Resident [*chargé d'affaires*] at the Spanish Court. Therefore in what I may say relative to his Station, I cannot be supposed to reflect upon him. Let a Gentleman of Integrity and abilities be stationed at the Court of Madrid in a Line more dignified than that of a resident, and let him bend his attention particularly to the operation of South American Politics and endeavour by every gentle and Persuasive advance, to gain some small commercial establishments and endeavour to quiet the Spanish Court, on the subject of those advances towards the opening of the Mississippi, which the settlement of its Banks must in time effect, & which that Government is at present apprehensive of, & are now trembling for the situation of their Colonies in consequence of our Success and establishments so near their borders.

A friendly commercial establishment with that Nation would give an immense spring to our affairs. It may not appear improbable but they would rather make one, & even open the Mississippi, than risk any Violence from us in that quarter, as it might immediately bring on the important Question between them and their Colonies, and which—as that country [territory] is so separated from the seat of our Government—we shall find an immense difficulty (if they have no outlet for their produce) in checking, even should we be seriously disposed to it. I know I am touching a very

important, alarming & delicate Subject, but this I also know. It has been an important Channel of wealth to us not only before the War, but from this course, flowed the present circulating cash of our Country. Upon these Principles which are self evident, why should we cease to pursue that by which we have always been benefitted.

I have the Honour to be with great respect Sir—your most Obedient humble Servant

W. S. SMITH

Source

*The Emerging Nation: A Documentary History of the Foreign Relations
of the United States under the Articles of Confederation, 1780-1789,*
Mary A. Giunta, Editor-in-Chief, Volume II. Washington, DC :
Government Printing Office, 1996.

NA: PCC, item 92, v. 1, pp. 2546 (ALS); M247, reel 120